



Fewer media outlets covering baseball, but will the lords care?

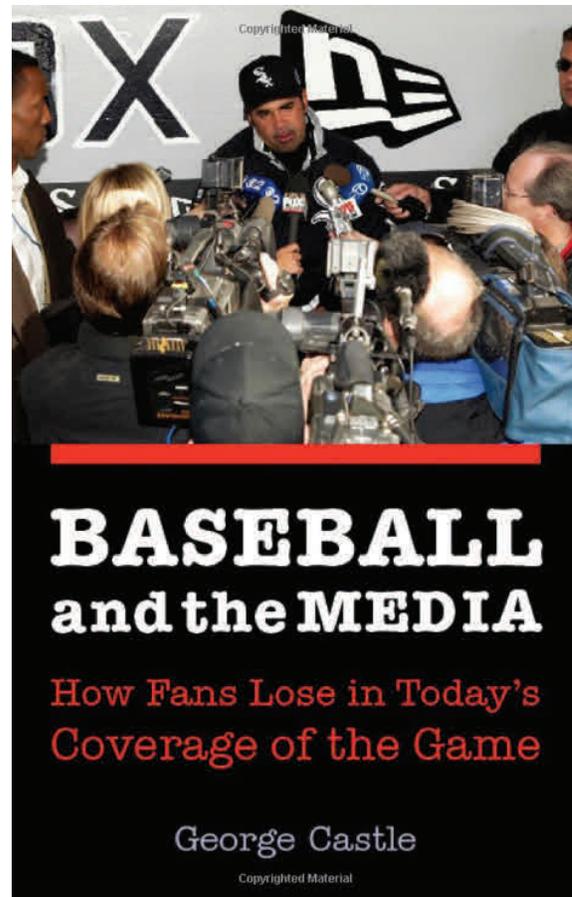
*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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The following facts should be presented to Milwaukee-based Bud Selig and his New York-headquartered assistants who run Major League Baseball. There are bad things encroaching on the protective bubble – supported by broadcast and sponsorship money – in which they operate.

The lords of the game may believe they've got a billion-dollar baby in their own multi-media on-line operation that will capture fans' attention. What they don't realize is baseball, competing against the colossus called the NFL, needs every publicity conduit it can garner. And in the wake of the Great Recession, those outlets are collapsing or cutting back at a frantic pace.

We'll list the ways in which baseball media coverage has been steadily cut in Chicago, both from the recession forward, and going back to more prosperous times in the 1990s:

- Starting the recent West Coast swing, just three beat writers – Mark Gonzales of the Chicago Tribune, Daryl Van Schouwen of the Chicago Sun-Times and Dan Hayes of CSNChicago.com – covered the White Sox in Oakland. Scott Merkin of MLB.com had the weekend off. ESPNChicago.com did not have a reporter on the road, as that outlet's management has deemed the Sox not generating enough on-line hits to staff the South Siders away from home. Even though the Sox held first place for most of the second half of the



George Castle's 2006 book, "Baseball and the Media," foretold the trend of coverage cuts that sped up rapidly after the book's publication.

2012 season, ESPNChicago.com did not follow them on the road. The site apparently made the same judgment in staying at home only in the regular season with the Blackhawks, and look which team is the last postseason-worthy one standing in Chicago as the Stanley Cup Finals begin.

- The Sun-Times laid off its entire photography staff. No other newspaper of its size in the country has undertaken such a radical move to stay afloat. That means adept “shooters” with decades of experience at Chicago ballparks won’t get riveting action shots anymore. I know some of the talented veterans who shoot for AP and Getty Images, but the Sun-Times can’t get custom-ordered shots anymore using wire services. They’ll have to take what is sent out over the wire.

Amid constant layoffs, the Sun-Times does preserve its sports travel budget to compete with the Tribune. But you wonder if they’ll have anybody left to send on the road.

- The Arlington Heights-based Daily Herald, run by the sports-minded Paddock family, instituted regular road coverage of the Cubs and Sox in 1988. That continued uninterrupted until about 2009. Now almost all regular travel except for overnight Bears trips has been cut. The cost of sending a beat writer on the road for an entire season was estimated at about \$50,000 – and that was a few years ago. So with AP, SportsXchange and several other sources of alternate road coverage available, a paper like the Daily Herald can save more than \$100,000 annually amid a circulation and advertising slide.
- The Daily Southtown-Star (then the Daily Southtown) began covering the Sox on the road with Phil Arvia in 1993. Cubs reporter Jeff Vorva began journeying out of town regularly when Sammy Sosa dueled Mark McGwire for the artificially-enhanced home-run crown in 1998. At the end of 2007, when the parent Sun-Times Media began its draconian company-wide cuts, all the Southtown-Star pro beat writers were whacked. Sun-Times pro coverage was substituted for their work. Arvia, promoted to sports editor over the dramatically shrunken staff, was laid off earlier this year, leaving a grand total of two staff sportswriters.
- CSNChicago is partially-owned by the Cubs, Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks. And yet for the first half of 2012, the web site of the teams’ primary cable TV outlet did not have a regular Sox reporter to succeed Brett Ballantini, who left after the 2011 season. CSNChicago reportedly talked to a favored candidate in the off-season of 2011-13, but couldn’t make the hire in time. Finally, in July 2012, the experienced Dan Hayes was hired from the now-defunct North County Times in suburban San Diego.
- Out-of-town newspapers have long abandoned regular Chicago baseball coverage. In the late 1980s, Carrie Muskat, now the Cubs’ reporter for MLB.com, regularly worked the city’s teams for the Rockford Register-Star. As late as 2003, the Register-Star covered a number of Cubs and Sox home games, and went on the road during the Cubs Bartman-tainted playoff run in ’03. But in 2004, bam! All Chicago coverage was dropped.

Similarly, the Grand Rapids Press, operating in a western Michigan area where the Cubs are second to the Detroit Tigers in popularity, used to cover parts of Cubs homestands in the 1990s and into the early 2000s. They now stay home. The Peoria Journal-Star with veteran scribe Dave Reynolds used to be a regular Wrigley Field visitor in the 1990s with a reserved pressbox seat. Reynolds has been a stranger in recent years.

- Radio Row” used to be a significant part of the local pressboxes. When the Wrigley Field pressbox was being designed in 1988-89, discussions ensued about dividing it in half – writers on one side, broadcasters on the other. There was always tension between the two groups with the scribes resenting the mic jockeys intruding on their exclusivity. Feeding tape over the phone in the pre-internet days, the radio folks were now able to beat them by hours with athletes’ interviews.

Scores of Chicago radio stations in the 1980s had reporters regularly covering the Cubs and Sox. Many FM stations -- rockers, oldies outlets, urban-contemporary -- had news departments out of which these reporters worked. Then came de-regulation in the 1990s. Stations junked their news departments to save money without the mandate of public service from the FCC. Now, “Radio Row” is largely limited to reporters like Bruce Levine of ESPN-1000 and David Schuster of The Score. Cheryl Raye-Stout of NPR outlet WBEZ (91.5 FM), a three-decade pressbox veteran, is regularly on the scene. But all-news WBBM-Radio does not have a reporter at the majority of games anymore. As the rights holder, WGN-Radio is faithfully at Wrigley Field, but more sporadically at The Cell. The total attendance on “Radio Row” is now really just a handful.



Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig (right), shown with 2007 MLB S.T.A.R. award winner Maddie Byrd, admitted newspaper coverage had helped build interest in the game through the decades.

I could keep going with more examples. But you get the picture. Covering baseball wire-to-wire has been deemed expendable in a contracting media world. In contrast, let’s get ready for some football! Media outlets blow out space and airtime to cover the NFL. ESPN.com just announced they’ll have beat writers in place for all 32 NFL teams, with a net hire of perhaps 25 on top of writers already covering football in markets like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Dallas.

Selig saddened by newspaper cuts

Commissioner Selig, an old-school newspaper reader who loved to hang with writers in County Stadium's pressbox in his Milwaukee Brewers ownership days, has stated the cuts in coverage haven't helped the game. He was quoted in former New York Times' baseball reporting ace Murray Chass blog that detailed how 29 of the 60 newspapers that traveled with their teams did not staff the 2009 World Series.

"I'm saddened by it," Selig said before Game 4 in 2009. "I think newspaper coverage over the years has enabled us to succeed much more than a lot of people understand so for me this is a very, very unhappy development."

"I don't know how," Selig responded when asked if the decline in coverage could be reversed. "This is far beyond me. This transcends me and our sport and everything else."

"I'm saddened by it, very saddened. Believe me, baseball will not be better off as a result,"



Jim Riggleman felt managers like himself should promote the game – which also was the function of media coverage. Photo credit [Cathy T.](#)

its main outlet the multi-media MLB.com. Media access guidelines have tightened in the last half-decade to help preserve MLB.com's goal for primacy as the go-to on-line baseball conduit. Use of on-line video highlights is severely restricted; team video rights-holders cannot archive their own game action.

Anyone with sense would want his sport written and talked about in as many forums as possible. The best statement any baseball man ever made was Jim Riggleman in his Cubs managerial days: "We're here to promote the game."

But those running the game day to day under Selig aren't acting like the coverage cuts are a problem, to make the game more inclusive with new outlets and reporters replacing the old ones falling by the wayside.

Major League Baseball is pushing, pushing, pushing its billion-dollar Baseball Advanced Media operation, with

Smaller market teams more liberal on access

Admittance of new-media, on-line outlets that aren't affiliated with large national "newsgathering" organizations or old-line local media is done haltingly. Smaller-market teams or mid-market clubs like the Washington Nationals, trying to cut into the NFL Redskins' media dominance, have been more flexible in credentialing the bloggers or start-up on-line outlets.

The creeping rollback of access, both to the ballpark and total locker-room pre-game interview time, has led to mounting cynicism among pressbox veterans. One line of thinking the past few years is Major League Baseball eventually would like to oust the media upon which it once heavily depended. Instead, its internal media operation would simply distribute video and audio interviews as it saw fit for use by outside media. Why let prying eyes and probing questions in when the message can be controlled?



Susannah Collins' firing by CSNChicago.com called into question regional sports networks' independence from sports-team ownership influence.

The big cutbacks haven't been as pronounced on the East Coast, where there still are "tabloid" wars in New York, and no major newspapers have folded or pulled their writers off the road. That surely cuts down the feeling of urgency in MLB's New York offices, where the influence of the still-massive New York home-and-road coverage is strongest. When layoffs commenced in Eastern or Midwest papers, baseball beat writers usually have been spared.

From the Rocky Mountains westward, though, coverage of baseball has been battered. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer and Rocky Mountain News (Denver) folded since 2008. Both covered local teams home and road. Like the Daily Southtown-Star, The Tribune newspapers of the East Valley of Phoenix gave up its local pro coverage. Other beat writers have been laid off in continual cutbacks at still-publishing newspapers. When just the Los Angeles Times remained in 2009 to cover the Dodgers on

the road (along with ESPNLosAngeles.com and MLB.com), the team began admitting fan bloggers who were vetted for professionalism.

Orange County Register restores coverage

The only reversal in the trend has been the Orange County Register, which startlingly has re-invested in the print product, and restored the Dodgers home and road coverage it had cut.

MLB.com, of course, has traveling beat writers for every team. But the scribes are denied membership in the Baseball Writers Association of America because they're perceived as MLB employees, despite published denials their stories are subject to the teams' review.

Regional sports networks have added not only traveling clubhouse reporters for their telecasts, but also writers for associated web sites. However, their editorial independence was in question where teams have had an ownership stake. That issue broke out in the open when video reporter Susannah Collins was fired by CSNChicago.com after a four-year old raunchy on-line series she taped suddenly came to life. Collins interviewed the Blackhawks' "star of the game" after the final horn for both for CSNChicago's viewers and the United Center crowd. When Hawks owner Rocky Wirtz was alerted to the old videos, he wrote to CSNChicago and copied all other Chicago owners connected with the channel. All the long-running suspicions about CSNChicago's true freedom to operate without ownership influence were confirmed by Wirtz's letter.

MLB already has ceded weekend afternoons to college and pro football. Postseason baseball will not be scheduled against football, pushing games into colder weather at night. Now the grand ol' game, its direction cocooned in newspaper-heavy New York and pushing its own huge web site, fiddles while its traditional publicity conduits burn.

Once again, the baseball consumer is the loser.